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Senate

The Senate met at 11 a.m. and was called to order by the President pro tempore (Mr. LEAHY).

PRAYER

The Chaplain, Dr. Barry C. Black, offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

Righteous God, Your power is unsurpassed. Manifest Your might during this challenging season. Lord, show us Your strength.

Use our Senators for Your glory. Provide them with the wisdom to look ahead and to count the cost. Inspire them to desire, above all else, to remain within the circle of Your loving and prevailing providence. Lord, give them sufficient caution to see the danger coming and refuse to plunge ahead.

And, Lord, we thank You for the amazing service of Secretary Julie Adams.

We pray in Your holy Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The President pro tempore led the Pledge of Allegiance, as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. The majority leader is recognized.

BUSINESS BEFORE THE SENATE

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, now, the Senate is laser-focused on confirming President Biden's impressive Cabinet while paving the way for another round of urgent COVID relief. The two tasks will remain the top Senate priorities over the next several weeks.

By the end of this week, the Senate will have confirmed three Cabinet-level

officials—the U.N. Ambassador and the Secretaries of Agriculture and Energy—and will have set up confirmation votes early next week for the Secretaries of Education and Commerce and the Chair of the Council of Economic Advisers.

This week, Senate committees also held confirmation hearings on scores of other nominations, including the President's candidates for Attorney General, HHS Secretary, Interior Secretary, CIA Director, Surgeon General, and U.S. Trade Representative.

At the same time, Democrats are preparing to proceed with the urgently needed President Biden American Rescue Plan, a \$1.9 trillion lifeline that will lay the foundation for economic recovery and a return to life as normal.

We have come a long way in our fight against COVID, but we still have a long way to go. Over 60 million vaccinations have now been administered across the country. Death rates are finally, finally declining. But while the trends are headed in the right direction, more Americans are still dying per day than at any point during the worst weeks of last summer.

The same goes for our economy. While there are green shoots, our country remains 10 million jobs short of where we were last February—10 million jobs short. That is nothing to trifle with or pass over. Today's report on new jobless claims was the 49th week that the number was higher than at any point during the great recession.

Let me repeat that. Today's report on the number of Americans filing for unemployment benefits for the first time was the 49th week during the COVID pandemic that new unemployment claims were higher than at any point during the great recession. In the words of Fed Chairman Powell, hardly a big liberal, "The economic recovery remains uneven and far from complete, and the path ahead is highly uncertain."

That is from a very serious, staid man not prone to any hyperbole at all.

But what he is telling us is simple: We cannot take our foot off the gas. We cannot slow down before the race is won. We must proceed boldly and decisively.

Senate Democrats will move forward on the American Rescue Plan as soon as possible. The bill will erase any doubt that the American people, businesses, families, workers will have the resources that they need until we can defeat the virus and our economy comes roaring back. The American people should expect nothing less.

Just yesterday, over 150 executives from the Nation's business community said that taking action on the American Rescue Plan is the right thing to do. The business community is firmly lined up behind this plan. Earlier this month, 400 mayors from both parties, Democratic and Republican, sent a letter to Congress supporting the plan and the help it provides to keep teachers and firefighters and other essential public employees on the job.

In poll after poll, the American public overwhelmingly supports congressional action on a bold COVID relief package, a majority of Democrats and a majority of Republicans. As many as 7 in 10 Americans support the American Rescue Plan. There is a clear, bipartisan, nationwide mandate to act, and that is just what the Senate is going to do—a clear, bipartisan, nationwide mandate to act, and that is what we will do.

Now, from the start, we had hoped this effort would be bipartisan. As I said before, there is nothing about the budget process that precludes bipartisanship. The same process has been used no fewer than 17 times to produce major bipartisan legislation. But it seems that despite the historic nature of the crisis, despite the clear and pressing needs of the country, despite the support of mayors and Governors and economists and business leaders from across the political spectrum, and

● This "bullet" symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.



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despite the popularity of the legislation with the American people, my Republican colleagues are organizing to oppose the next round of COVID relief.

A report in CNN suggested that Republican leaders were “maneuvering” to keep every single Republican from supporting the American Rescue Plan, an exercise in pure partisanship. We have started to hear the same predictable objections in almost the same exact words that Republicans use in response to nearly every piece of Democratic legislation: “a liberal wish list”; “socialism.”

One Republican Member said that the American Rescue Plan was “to the left of Lenin.” Seriously, to the left of Lenin? Money for schools, vaccines, direct checks to struggling American families—checks that nearly every Member of the Senate supported just a few months ago—now it is to the left of Lenin?

This kind of reflexive partisan opposition is not going to wash with the American people. It wouldn’t wash at any time, but it especially doesn’t wash during this time of crisis. The American people have all heard it before, and they know the country needs help.

All week our Republican colleagues have been raising concerns about school closures. Well, I will tell you what, we all want to open schools. We all want them to reopen. We are all concerned, though, about the cost of remote learning on children and parents. So are the teachers. So are the children. So are the parents.

But how about we actually give schools the funding they need to reopen as quickly and safely as possible? That funding is in the American Rescue Plan. While our Republican colleagues are cynically attacking teachers—something they have done for decades—the school districts in their States are telling them they need more funding. Their school districts are telling them they need more funding to hire extra teachers and reduce class size, to change the infrastructure of their schools to increase social distancing, to hire tutors for summer school and the fall to help our children make up for lost time.

The education commissioner for the State of Nebraska, hardly a Democratic stronghold, put it simply: “There’s a lot of damage to repair.” Our Republican colleagues want schools to reopen. So do we. But what about actually doing something to make that happen as safely and as quickly as possible?

It seems my Republican colleagues have even taken issue with the tiny amount of funding in the bill that goes to a bridge in New York. They say: Look, a pork-barrel earmark from the Democratic leader, totally non-COVID-related. The truth is, this is one of the only bridges operated by the Federal Government. Its revenues for operating expenses have collapsed because of COVID. No one is using the bridge.

Ironically, the bridge is located in a district represented in the House by a Republican. And the request for this funding wasn’t made by me or any Democrat, for that matter. It came from the Trump administration 5 months ago. I learned about it being in the bill when I read about it in the newspaper.

That is how silly the talking points of the other side have gotten. Republicans are not happy about a small provision in the bill requested by the previous Republican administration, so they are going to oppose direct checks to struggling families, another round of assistance for small businesses, and money for schools and vaccinations. The argument is absurd and, we know, a total excuse.

Look, we Democrats would prefer to work with our colleagues on the other side of the aisle to pass this bill. We had an open, bipartisan amendment process on the budget resolution. We have already included many bipartisan amendments the Senate adopted into this new reconciliation bill. The first amendment we put on the floor for the restaurants was bipartisan, and that was the first amendment I put on the floor as majority leader, showing my intent to be bipartisan.

But, at the end of the day, we cannot let obstructionism stop us. At the end of the day, the American people sent us here with a job to do.

The bottom line is simple: We are still in a historic crisis of the health of the economy. The American people know we are in a historic crisis. And the Senate will soon take action on our plan to solve this crisis, a plan with overwhelming public support. Our Republican colleagues will have to decide whether they will work with us to approve the legislation or obstruct it to the bitter end.

I yield the floor.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. BOOKER). Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will be in a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

The Senator from Vermont.

WELCOMING ANN BERRY

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I appreciate what the leader just said about COVID. It certainly reflects the feelings of people in my State that we have to get going.

But I am here on a different matter today. Since the 1780s, we have had an extraordinary list of Secretaries of the Senate. The outgoing Secretary Julie Adams is one of those extraordinary

people who have been here, and I have had the distinct pleasure and honor of serving with so many.

But let me be personal for a moment. On Monday, in my role as President pro tempore, I will administer the oath of office to an amazing person, Sonceria Ann Berry. She will become the Secretary of the Senate.

This is a woman who earned her bachelor’s degree in education from the University of North Alabama, and she has had so much experience in the Senate. She first worked for Senator Howell Heflin of Alabama.

I had the pleasure of serving with Senator Heflin—as I found when I would travel to Alabama with him, he usually would be greeted with “Hello, Judge.” He was a man who had an extraordinary sense of how the Senate worked but made very clear to me how much he relied on Ann Berry. She worked with other good friends of mine: Senator Pat Moynihan, whose office was right down the hall from mine, and Senator Edwards and Senator CARPER. She took time out from her duties in my office to help stand up Senator JONES’ office.

She came to the Leahy office in 2007, and she worked with my chief of staff, J.P. Dowd. They gave such leadership to my office, and I have found that almost daily, I would stick my head into Ann’s office and say: Here is the situation; what do you think we should do here or there? I knew what a go-to in the Senate she had been for generations of staffers, a mentor to dozens of young staffers and interns. I have also said over and over again that we Senators are merely a constitutional impediment to our staffs. Well, this impediment was delighted he could go to Ann Berry and seek help and advice.

I think of her and her family—Reginald, her wonderful husband, and her daughter, Elizabeth, whom I have had a chance to see grow up to become a young woman who is distinguishing herself working here in the Senate.

I also think of her sayings, like “This, too, shall pass” or “I may have been born at night, but I wasn’t born last night.” “There is more than one way to skin a cat,” or sometimes when we had been here late into the night, she says, “Nothing good happens after midnight.” But with her, everything good happened.

I think of the Senate and all of us in it, in a way, as a family. Over my years here, I have become more and more aware of that. But Ann Berry truly was. I don’t know how many times somebody working in my office would have an issue—not just the professional things; she was always there to answer those and give direction. They would go in and say, “You know, I have had this thing that has been troubling me” and know that they could get wonderful advice but also advice in confidence.

I will admit that my grandchildren, my wife and I think the world of her. We do have one grandchild, now 15, but